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Boxing needs governing body

Posted March 7 2004

The tragic death of Luis Villalta could have been prevented.

Like so many other ring fatalities, had their been stricter medical guidelines and more medical testing for boxers who were knocked out in previous fights, Villalta would probably be home in Lima, Peru, with his wife and two children.

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Saturday, his body, accompanied by his wife and father, was flown to Hillsborough, N.J., where he had lived and trained for the past three years. A viewing and memorial service is Monday. His body will be cremated.

Villalta, 35, a nine-time national champion lightweight, died Wednesday after being in a coma

since collapsing in his dressing room after losing his North American Boxing Association title Feb. 28 at the Seminole Tribe of Florida Coconut Creek Casino. He was 29-6-1 with 25 knockouts.

He died of acute head trauma and hematoma on the brain, according to his manager, Anthony Toresco.

It was his second consecutive loss by knockout. In August, he was knocked out by Alex Trujillo in an IBA welterweight title fight. Three months earlier he scored a fourth-round knockout of Mexico's Jose Luis Soto-Karass where there was a clash of heads. Villalta was shaken but continued the fight.

How many more deaths will it take before the sport cleans up its act? Boxing traditionalists have balked at stricter regulations and guidelines that have been discussed and debated for years. In the past 80 years about 700 fighters have died in the ring, 13 in Florida.

Boxing has had more than its share of sickening deaths. Jimmy Doyle was killed by Sugar Ray Robinson in 1947. Benny Paret pounded Emile Griffith into a coma in a 1962 grudge match and Duk Koo-Kim was killed by Ray "Boom Boom" Mancini in 1982.

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"You start searching and thinking, my boxer has a broken jaw and could possibly have a concussion, but back then we didn't have the luxury of all the advanced medical testing they have today," legendary trainer Angelo Dundee said. "There were guys walking around with blood clots, and we didn't know it.

"Today medicine is so advanced with MRIs and CAT scans, it's perfect for a fighter -- you know he is always going to be 100 percent. Let's face it, this is the toughest sport out there. But try to make a rule? It's like talking outside the window. I don't think the state would go for it."

If Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., chairman of the Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, has anything to say about it, every state boxing commission will have to go for it.

It would be the law.

McCain has proposed a bill that would create a federal regulatory agency to set standards for the boxing industry. The Senate Commerce Committee approved the bill in March and it is awaiting full Senate consideration.

Boxing is the only major pro sport without a central governing body. There is no other pro sport in which the rules and regulations vary so widely from state-to-state, according to McCain.

In most states, all it takes to become a boxer is a license fee and minimal physical exam that includes basic tests for AIDS, eye problems and hernias. There are no background checks on whether a boxer has skills to fight.

Last year in Cedar City, Utah, a 35-year-old boxer collapsed in the ring and died. The boxer had lost 25 consecutive times over a three-year period, but the local boxing commission allowed him to box.

The Association of Boxing Commissions, a non-profit organization that represents 46 states and eight tribal boxing commissions, promotes health and safety provisions but has no enforcement authority over its members. The 1996 Professional Boxing Safety Act established minimum health and safety standards. The Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act of 2000 amended the 1996 act to better protect boxers. Still, boxers are dying.

"I don't think [Luis' death] will set boxing back," Dundee said. "You have to look at it realistically. When they get in that ring, they know they have to be prepared and what's at stake. Don't look to find fault, look to find solutions."

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